

## THE WORLD'S GREATEST KNIGHT: MALORY, THEME AND FORM

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One of the thorny problems of reading Thomas Malory arises from the question of whether we should see the episodes as isolated, merely collected stories (beyond of course their essentially chronological order) or as a thematic continuum. One of the sticky problems of teaching Malory in a medieval survey or medieval romance course or even in a King Arthur course involves deciding how to excerpt, since the *Works* (as Vinaver terms the book) could itself fill a course. We can hardly ignore this central clearing house of Arthurian material, but which tales should we foreground? What themes or concerns should we stress? How can we, as we must almost inevitably do, account—beyond individual preferences—for our choices? What was Malory doing, what is he about, and can we find any central issue to use as a guide?

The MLA's *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition* makes a good starting point for course-design questions. Maureen Fries suggests a number of interesting combinations of Arthurian works for courses at various levels from high school to graduate. Philip Boardman suggests blending medieval and modern versions to exploit the contemporary revival of interest in connections among myth, magic, and religion. Robert Kindrick aptly points out that separating Caxton's editing from Malory's intent constitutes an immediate problem in Malory scholarship.

As much as one may say that the *Morte Darthur* is about anything, I would like to suggest that it follows the various characters called "the world's greatest knight" in an effort to define, redefine, and solidify our understanding of how a knight attains that title. The narrative recounts the adventures of those knights who receive that designation and ties the changes in what characterizes the world's greatest knight into the evolution of an Arthurian ethos.

Northrop Frye writes in *The Return of Eden* that

[i]n Malory there is a series of graded knights, each knight being better than any other knight he can knock off his horse. Lancelot by this standard is the best knight in the world, "but if it were Sir Tristram"; the pagan knight Palomides is third, and Gawain and Gareth follow. Arthur, though, an able knight and treated with respect as a king, is by no means at the top of the list of seeded players, and if he goes into a tournament disguised and comes up against Lancelot or Tristram, down he goes over his horse's crupper. (104)

These points are true, but only partly true, depending upon the point at which one picks up the story. Following the divisions in Vinaver's edition, one finds in *The Tale of King Arthur* Balin (and perhaps also his brother Balan) praised by Merlin: "[T]here lyvith nat a bettir of proues, nother of worthyness." Later, even a bit player, Garnysh of the Mownte calls Balin "the Knyght with the Two Swerdis, and the man of moste proues of youre hondis lyvynges."

In *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur That Was Emperor Himself Through the Dignity of His Hands*, which follows the tale of Balin and Balan, Arthur himself is addressed by King Angwysshaunce as "aboven all othir Crysten kynges for of knyghthode and of noble counceyle," and indeed Arthur accomplishes the greatest feats of any soldier in the Roman campaign, briefly earning for himself the top spot as the world's greatest knight, which allows him the respect necessary for a warrior king.

Soon, of course, Lancelot appears in the lists and wins the title by general acclaim, and he proves himself at that time far beyond Arthur or any of Arthur's knights in prowess, though he shares the designation of "world's best" occasionally. For instance, in *The Book of Sir Tristram of Lyonesse*, he labors to a draw with Tristram in the greatest battle ever fought by two knights, foretold in the

very first book by Merlin. Lancelot later cedes his title entirely to Galahad during the *Tale of the Sankgreal*, only to reclaim it after Galahad's passing.

This construct explains the devotion of a whole tale to Sir Gareth, a tale which appears to be Malory's own, not drawn from a source, as are so many of the stories that make up the *Morte Darthur*. Gareth at one point fights Lancelot to a draw and mutual truce, thus making him, at least temporarily, the equal of the world's greatest knight, worthy to be knighted by him, and worthy of at least a share of the title of world's greatest knight. Otherwise, *The Tale of Sir Gareth* seems almost superfluous, a strange though entertaining break in the tale of Sir Lancelot or an odd but moral preface to *The Book of Sir Tristram*.

*The Book of Sir Tristram of Lyones* is by far the longest in the *Morte Darthur*. It relates the adventures of many knights, but chiefly those of Tristram and Lancelot and how for a time they share the title. For instance, though Tristram is felled by Lancelot at the tournament at Lonezep, Lancelot on the second day gives up the prize to Tristram, arguing that Tristram has on that day performed worthier deeds. In this book also Lancelot, by means of enchantment, is induced to beget Galahad upon Elaine, who calls him the best knight in the world. Later, when Elaine visits Camelot, Lancelot is again enchanted to lie with Elaine, who he thinks is Guinevere. When Guinevere finds out what has happened and scolds him, Lancelot goes mad and disappears from court for more than two years. Presumably during that time Tristram is the world's greatest knight, and as his book closes, Sir Palomydes adjudges, "I dare sey I felte never man of youre myght nothir so well-brethed but yf hit were sir Launcelot du Laake."

The stories of the loves and jousts of Lancelot and Tristram are followed, of course, by the *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, which features Sir Galahad and shows him the most perfect of all earthly knights, the knight whom even Lancelot cannot unhorse. Having achieved the quest of the Holy Grail and having experienced its

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mysteries to the full, Galahad prays that he may be delivered of this earth, and, commending himself to his comrades and his soul to God, he realizes his proper end:

And so suddeynly departed hys soule to Jesu Cryst and a grete multitude of angels bare hit up to hevyne in the syght of hys two felowis. . . . And sythen was there never man so hardy to sey that he hade sey[ne] the Sankgreal. (607)

As the chief grail knight, Galahad shows the perfect combination of holiness, courtesy, and prowess that makes him the greatest of the world's greatest knights. One gets the sense that the combination is one of Malory's main points: a knight does not succeed by martial ability alone.

*The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* follows the Grail quest. Sir Tristram having been treacherously killed by King Mark, and Galahad having ascended to Heaven, Lancelot remains as sole title-holder. We see this point confirmed not only in Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere in the story of "The Knight of the Cart," but also in another story that is apparently, despite his attributing it to a "Freynshe boke," one of Malory's own additions to Arthuriana, "The Healing of Sir Urry." This brief story has great importance in the development of Lancelot's character and for our understanding of what makes the world's greatest knight.

In Spain seeking renown Sir Urry of the Mount undertook a battle with a Sir Alpheus "for verry envy," that is, probably, because of mutual wrath. Urry kills Alpheus but receives himself "seven grete woundis, three on the hede and three on hys body, and one uppon hys lyffte honde." Because of enchantments placed upon him by Alpheus's mother, "a grete sorseras," Urry's wounds will not heal "untylle the beste knyght of the worlde had serched hys woundis." Urry's mother, sister, and page cart him through many lands with no success. He arrives ultimately at Arthur's court at Pentecost, and Arthur declares, "[H]ere shall youre son be

healed and ever ony Crystyn man [may] heale hym." Arthur tries first, "nat presumyng uppon me that I am so worthy to heale youre son be my dedis, but I woll corrayge othir men of worshyp to do as I woll do." Then Malory rehearses the list of the one hundred ten knights then at court, each of whom tries unsuccessfully to heal Urry's wounds. It is no slack list, including Sir Bors, one of the Grail knights, and Sir Sevrause le Brewse, who promised the Lady of the Lake never to do battle with Lancelot, and who never fought against other men, but only against giants, dragons, and beasts, and Sir Lamorak, "the moste nobeleste knyght one of them that ever was in kynge Arthurs dayes as for a wordly knyght" (note *wordly*). Arthur bemoans Lancelot's absence, but then Lancelot is spotted and brought to the task. Lancelot too responds humbly, that he dare not assert himself beyond other knights, but at Arthur's beseeching, he prays devoutly and touches each of the wounds, and each heals immediately as though it had never existed. Sir Urry rises from his bed ready for a joust, and Lancelot weeps "as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn!" Here Lancelot becomes, as is Galahad, Christ-like, achieving briefly a purer version of ideal knighthood.

This tale is followed almost immediately by the treacherous discovery of Lancelot and Guinevere *in flagrante delicti*, which of course touches off *le morte d'Arthur*, in which tale Lancelot once again and finally proves himself the world's greatest knight, finally to die a holy man. He does not match his son, but in some senses he doubles him, as Galahad doubles Christ, or becomes him to the degree that any earthly knight may. With the downfall of Arthur's court and the deaths of the king and of the world's greatest knight, the world descends into the chaos whence it came, with only a vague hope remaining for the someday return of the king whose court harbored and encouraged legend's greatest chivalry.

In looking back over the tales of the knights, we find a pattern, beginning with Balin, whose dolorous stroke wounds King Pellam and creates the need for Galahad's accomplishing the quest of the

Grail, and leading to Lancelot, who finally abjures his sins and becomes a hermit. Balin, a wordly knight, seeks only to serve King Arthur and win honor, no mean goal, but certainly an earthly one. He dies from wounds received in a battle with his brother, Balan, when they fight not recognizing each other. The point of the equation of the names of the brothers, the fact that the names sound alike, is the suggestion that Balin figuratively kills himself—Balan serves essentially as a character double or another self—probably because his focus is earthly rather than spiritual. He does not even recognize the “mervaylous spere,” with which he wounds King Pellam, for what it is, the spear with which Longinus pierced Christ’s side. Balin, the most earthly of the “world’s greatest knights,” holds the title only briefly and falls in the youth of his service.

The next book focuses on Arthur, whom we see as a much more Christian knight, though he accomplishes his ends through battle. This book serves, I think, to point a direction for the character of the world’s greatest knight and to establish Arthur as a great knight worthy to be the world’s greatest king and thus worthy of the service of the world’s greatest knights. Once he has achieved his empire and essentially retired from knightly deeds to kingship, he can no longer do the deeds necessary of the world’s greatest knight, and so a new figure must replace him.

There Lancelot enters, and in the next book he achieves deserved recognition as the world’s greatest earthly knight. As Larry Benson points out, Malory needed “to invent a new tale of Lancelot, one that would in brief compass raise him from the relatively minor role that he plays in *Arthur and the Emperor Lucius* and establish him as the greatest of knights and best of lovers” (81). R. M. Lumiansky similarly aims to make “indisputably apparent” the book’s “general unity in theme, structure, and characterization” (4) with the organizational principle being, as Mary Dichman specifies, “the pattern of Lancelot’s supremacy” (75). Malory closes this third book by

announcing that "at that tyme sir Launcelot had the grettyste name of any knyght of the worlde, and moste he was honoured of hyghe and lowe." Until the very end of Malory, that is Lancelot's position: world's greatest *earthly* knight. Only at the end of the final book, "The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon," does he become the holiest knight living as well.

In the fourth book Gareth briefly matches Lancelot for martial prowess and for courtesy, and in a sense surpasses him morally and ethically, as well as according to religious law, for he successfully completes his quest and marries his beloved, dame Lyonesse. Oddly enough, marriage and settling down, retiring from errantry, seems to disqualify a knight from holding or striving for the title of world's greatest knight, and Gareth serves no important function in the remainder of Malory's work (other than that his death provokes battle between Arthur's court and Lancelot's followers). His brief stint as co-holder of the title does, though, exemplify what we might call the ideal of the "world's greatest earthly knight," someone who achieves his quest, marries his love, and remains (as far as we know) faithful to her. Gareth, both brave and true, succeeds as a knight and as a Christian, but the marital tie disqualifies him from the greatest test for a Christian knight, the quest for the Holy Grail, and it seems to sap him of the power necessary to continue to vie martially with Lancelot for the title of world's greatest earthly knight. Gareth may also serve, though, as the exemplar of married love, which is killed by adulterous love; Lancelot's killing Gareth during the rescue of Guinevere provokes Gawain's seeking revenge, which ultimately brings about the battle in which Arthur is killed and the fellowship of the round table dispersed. In that sense, one may say that Lancelot, in killing Gareth, kills a part of himself as well. Alternatively, one may argue that Lancelot, or Gareth, or even Galahad represents the problem of divided loyalties: to remain the world's greatest knight, the soldier's first loyalty must be to knighthood and his king.

Following next, the *Book of Sir Tristram* creates a character double for Lancelot. Tristram like Lancelot possesses both great martial prowess and the love of his king's wife. But in Tristram I find no hint of Christian concern. Lancelot at least strives to experience the mysteries of the Grail, and he fathers the knight who accomplishes the quest. Tristram, while he tries to act courteously, gives in to a moment of weakness and marries Isode of the White Hands, who was good enough to heal him, though he marries her out of gratitude rather than love and claims that as far as he knows, she remains a maid. Tristram pursues no Christian quest, though, and he apparently dies an unshriven adulterer. Perhaps that circumstance accounts for the preference that Malory seems to show for Lancelot even as the two knights share the title of world's greatest.

The sixth book recounts the quest of the Holy Grail, in which Sir Galahad surpasses all knights living, dead, or to come. As the perfect warrior and Christian, he fulfills, supposedly, Lancelot's potential, though I wonder if Lancelot would have been Lancelot without Guinevere. In this book we see a realignment of the graded knights according to Christian virtue rather than martial prowess. Gawain, for instance, passes out of the story quickly and brutally. We also see the greatest knightly achievement: the completion of the Grail quest, a quest for God rather than for earthly fame, though, as the greatest of the world's greatest knights, Galahad wins both, largely through freedom from anger, lust, or any other sin. The earlier "Christian knighthood" that seemed doomed by divided loyalties achieves its ideal in Galahad.

With Galahad's Christ-like departure from this world, Lancelot regains his old title, firmed up by King Mark's assassination of Tristram and solidified by Lancelot's healing of Sir Urry. The seventh and eighth books offer no serious challenge to Lancelot's title, and his turn to holiness following Arthur's death and Guinevere's retreat to the convent brings him as close as an earthly knight may come to the knightly perfection of Galahad.



Thus we travel in our history from the earthly Balin to the earthly but holier Arthur, to the greatest of all merely earthly knights, Lancelot, to the courteous but married Gareth, to the courteous but adulterous Tristram (a Christian low-point that is, strangely, by far the longest book in Malory), to the greatest of heaven's knights (in contrast to Tristram), Galahad, and back to Lancelot. Their concerns move from earthly to more spiritual, back to earthly, to their least spiritual point with Tristram, to their holiest point with Galahad, and back to Lancelot, who vacillates, becoming holy at last. As Benson mentions, Malory's "method of invention is simple enough: a common pattern of action—a proof-of-knighthood theme—provides the shape of the narrative" (71).

Malory does seem to balance his interest in romance with a dose of *contemptus mundi* or at least of the transience of this life and an interest in preparation for the one to come. I find somewhat curious that he concludes by predicting Arthur's someday return, and not Galahad's or Lancelot's, but perhaps with Arthur come all the rest, or perhaps Arthur's presence and accomplishments will always draw to him the world's greatest living knights. Perhaps Malory's own career led him to reflect on the nature of true knighthood and good kingship, especially if he saw himself as the "ill-framed" (*mal oret*) knight aiming to serve the proper king against the historical background of the War of the Roses.<sup>1</sup>

The construct "the world's greatest knight" provides a thread that sews together Malory's tapestry and connects each tale to the other thematically. It offers the general reader a doorway through which one may both enter and depart Malory's labyrinth, and perhaps more usefully it allows one to select readings for students and tie those readings to the remaining tales. Should one excerpt, I suggest beginning (assuming students know the "sword in the stone" story) with the matter of "King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius" to establish Arthur as Christian knight and king, then following with the *Tale of the Sankgreal* plus "The Knight of the Cart" and "The Healing of Sir Urry" as presentations of Galahad

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and Lancelot, the two knights most commonly associated with the title and best representing the struggles of the world's greatest knight as earthly and heavenly concerns clash. One must add, then, for the sake of closure, the death of Arthur, and then, as time and taste permit, more background on Sir Lancelot. My suggestions to some degree play down Lancelot, Malory's focus perhaps even more than Arthur, but they do show him at his most and least successful. They leave out Tristram,<sup>2</sup> whose long book largely recapitulates and expands on the Lancelot-style love dilemma, and they also leave out Gareth's tale, a favorite of many colleagues and students for its romantic love story and its own peculiar charm. (If you can spend a couple more days, leave him in.) They would, though, provide students exposure to some of the chief sections that deal with the ubiquitous question of who reigns as the world's greatest knight. And though my construct may oversimplify a massive and complex work, I offer it as a reading tool, with a wish that to the greatest degree possible we may be spared the need to excerpt at all.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> For interesting discussions of Thomas Malory's identity, see William Matthews' *The Ill-Framed Knight* and P. J. Field's convincing book, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Solcum makes this suggestion. She excerpts only the "Lancelot and Elaine" sections from the "Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones," which I find a good idea, since we thereby retain the story of the conception of Galahad.

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